

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

I Thessalonians 5: 16-24

St. John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Advent III 2020.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...”

Isaiah 61: 1a

The ancient prophecy has been fulfilled. The Spirit of the Lord is upon the faithful. Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord us upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me
To bring good tidings to the afflicted,
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound...

“Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8: 21)...”

The world is now shaken and renewed. The good news of the Lord Jesus is for all people – he brings good tidings to the afflicted, the wounds of the broken heart are bound up, and the prisoners and the captives are freed...

Isaiah 61 records this ancient prophecy from God to a wounded people. Christians understand this prophecy was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah... In fact, in the first sermon in the house of prayer where Jesus grew up, Jesus Christ proclaimed these words of the prophet, and then said to his listeners, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing...”

God... is up to something...

How do we understand this passage? We know there are still prisoners and captives; we know there are still many, many wounded people who need the healing touch of the Lord. We know there are many afflicted who have not heard any tidings of good news... How are we to understand this passage? How can we claim the prophecy has been fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ, when we live in such a troubled world – ravaged by COVID-19, moral pollution, economic injustice, and environmental degradation?...

In a sense, Christians have one foot in the old world, and another in the new... We are like ambassadors. An ambassador is a citizen of one country, and that’s where his or her heart is... But an ambassador is sent to *another* country, a foreign land, to represent their country of origin as best they can, and to defend the interests of the country they came

from. By faith in Jesus Christ, you and I are citizens of God's eternal kingdom. The old life of sin no longer has a claim on us. Our heart is with God... But you and I are called to be ambassadors of heaven in the country we live in now... One glorious day, "heaven and earth will pass away," says Jesus. But not yet. We're called to live faithfully for heaven, here on earth...

Let's also note that the ancient prophecies of the coming Messiah are more like poems than history stories... When Isaiah prophesies the coming of John the Baptist, we read that the mountains will be brought down, and the valleys will be raised up. That doesn't mean that John the Baptist will go around waving his hands and filling up the valleys with mountain dirt! It is a picture, an image, a poem. The earthly order of things will be up-ended through Jesus the Christ, as the Son of God is crucified like a common criminal, where the humble will be exalted, and the last will be first, and the first will be last... We're being given a picture about what the kingdom of God is like, and it's meant to move our hearts...

When we read the ancient prophecy in Isaiah 61 that the prisons will be opened, it's not a literal message that law-courts will be abolished, and there will be no more criminals in Canada... But there are many kinds of prisons, aren't there? Addictions are kind of bondage; sin, Paul observes, enslaves us... God wants us to be free from everything that binds our lives and crushes our spirits...

To understand the ancient prophecies – or indeed, to understand many of the psalms or some other parts of the Old and New Testaments – it's likely helpful to approach them like poetry. God is revealing wonderful truths, about himself and about his creation. We need to use our heads, yes; but we also need to use our hearts, truly to understand...

To approach some of the Bible's message this way can be stretching for some of us, because many of us were raised to be a bit cautious of our feelings. They are so fleeting! Feelings come and go... If we depended only on our feelings for our walk with God, then in our good days we would say, "I'm feeling very good today; I must be a good Christian!" And if we get out of the wrong side of bed, and have a miserable day, then it would be easy to ask ourselves, "I'm not carrying the joy of the Lord. Can I really be a Christian?..." Feelings come, and go. We depend, ultimately, on the historical facts that Jesus Christ was born, ministered, died and rose again. Feelings are not the measure of our faithfulness...

But feelings have their place... God created you and me to have the experiences of joy and of tears, of distress and of peace, and so on... We're called to love with all our heart – and soul and mind and strength... If we just try to approach Christianity with our heads alone, we can develop clever arguments, but we might be terrible disciples. We need to use our heads *and* our hearts...

This can be expressed in the way we worship. When we gather together, it can't just be chaos. Paul instructs the early Church to conduct our worship decently and in order. He cautioned against abuses of Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. Sermons present words, and ideas...

But that's not all that we do when we worship, is it?... There's also music. Music is mostly for the heart... Some of us express our faith with our bodies – we cross ourselves or we put our hands in the air in praise... Some people are moved to draw when they worship; some dance. (The recorded diocesan service being played this Sunday includes a recording of liturgical dancing. That's stretching to me; they just didn't do that in the parish where I grew up. But thankfully God is not constrained by this preacher's childhood. Tasteful worship can include our whole bodies.) Of course, people who use their bodies in worship should not look down on those who are still; and those who are still should not look down on those who move. Surely there will room enough in heaven for all kinds of worship...

Today's first lesson challenges us to understand the world a new way, through the lens of the Spirit of the Lord. The world has been changed by Jesus Christ, and we are called to contribute by resisting sin, and bringing about the priorities of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus...

Let's use the heads God has given us. But let's also use our hearts, to declare the mighty works of the One who has called us from darkness into his marvelous light. Let's surrender joyfully into Christ's loving arms, to whom we belong, and to whom goes all the glory; now and for ever.

Amen.